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Statius and Sophocles on Athens, Thebes and Rome

P. J. Heslin

The *Thebaid* of Statius ends with a pointed contrast between Athens and Thebes when the forces of Theseus and Creon meet in the final battle of the epic. A Roman reader might well have wondered which city his own was most like: fratricidal Thebes, wracked by civil war, or Athens, bringer of peace and cosmopolitan city of culture? This antithesis is, of course, framed from an Athenian standpoint, and the contrast with Thebes is particularly evocative of Athenian tragedy. As we will see, in the final book of the *Thebaid* the genre of tragedy epitomizes Athens in a specific, crucial way. This conception rests not merely on the plot of one play, although the *Suppliant Women* provides the basis for the action, and not just on the works of one playwright, in this case Euripides; Statius illustrates his conception of tragedy with examples from all three of the canonical playwrights, and particularly, since we are dealing with the house of Oedipus, from the work of Sophocles. This paper will argue that Statius emphasizes one particular aspect of tragedy, that distinctively Athenian genre, in order to turn Athens into both a positive and a negative paradigm for Rome.

It is well established that the final books of the *Thebaid* were heavily influenced by Euripides, particularly the *Phoenician Women* for the account of the assault on Thebes and Jocasta's attempt at mediation, and to the *Suppliant Women* for the story in the final book of the epic of how the women of Argos successfully petition Theseus to intervene and to stop Creon from preventing the burial of their kin.¹ In contrast, the influence of Sophocles has hardly been detected at all.² This seems a bit strange, given the fame, even in antiquity, of Sophocles' Theban plays, which treated parts of the same chain of events as Statius. As we will see, Statius in fact plays quite overtly on the fame of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and from this it should emerge that Statius at the very least expects his audience to be familiar with the Sophoclean narrative in general terms. We will begin by looking at a few passages from the end of the *Thebaid* where Statius seems to give some hints in the direction of Sophocles. These occur just at the point where Statius is describing a version of events contrary to what is found in Sophocles, and so perhaps constitute an acknowledgment by the poet that the audience might have a different version of the story in mind. I hope this proves to be more than just an exercise in

- 1 See Vessey 1973, index, s.v. "Euripides"; Vessey is keen to stress Statius' originality, and so tends in fact to highlight the ways in which he diverged from Euripides. See also Smolenaars 1994, 214–17 and 410–13.
- 2 Vessey 1973, 69. The apparent absence of Sophoclean influence on Statius has been emphasized more recently by Holford-Strevens 2000a, 47f. and 2000b, 237. He does allow in the former article that it is quite probable that Statius himself encountered Sophocles as part of his education.

source-criticism, for I want to argue that the competition of Sophoclean and Euripidean models at the end of the *Thebaid* has important ramifications for how we interpret the epic.

Our hunt for hints of Sophocles starts at the end of Book 11 of the *Thebaid*. Statius follows Euripides' *Phoenician Women* quite closely here, and so Oedipus is still alive and resident in Thebes at the end of the war, in contrast to the version of events found in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus dies in exile soon after the beginning of hostilities. In the *Thebaid*, Creon, the new king of Thebes, sends Oedipus into exile after the deaths of Eteocles and Polynices, just as he does at the end of the *Phoenician Women*. Oedipus reacts angrily:

linquere tecta iubes? caelum terramque reliqui
sponte, atque ultricem crudelis in ora retorsi
non ullo cogente manum: quid tale iubere,
rex inimice, potes? fugio excedoque nefandis
sedibus; an refert quo funera longa measque
transportem tenebras? ne non gens cuncta precanti
concedat, patriae quantum miser incubo terrae?
(Stat. *Theb.* 11.692–8)

Are you ordering me to leave the palace? I have left heaven
and earth of my own free will, and have cruelly turned my
avenging hand on my eyes, though no one compelled me.
What can you, my king and enemy, command to equal that? I
flee, and depart this unholy place; does it matter where I
convey my blindness and my lingering death? [Should I fear]
that not every nation will grant my prayer for as much of their
native soil as my miserable body occupies?³

The question asked here, “does it matter where Oedipus dies?”, is about as good a brief summary of the dramatic crux of the *Oedipus at Colonus* as you will find, and Oedipus anticipates here the events of that play. Of course, Euripides and Statius move those events into the future, whereas for Sophocles, they have already happened, and Oedipus is already dead. So Statius overtly follows Euripides' version of the timing of events, while casting the language in terms that recall Sophocles.

This hint of the *Oedipus at Colonus* is echoed a little bit later, when Statius' Creon confirms Oedipus' exile, rejecting Antigone's pleas. As a concession, he allows Oedipus to remain within Theban territory, so long as he stays out of the city, and keeps to Mount Cithaeron, where he was exposed as a baby:

3 All translations are my own.

flectitur adfatu, sed non tamen omnia rector
 supplicis indulget lacrimis partemque recidit
 muneris. 'haud,' inquit, 'patriis prohibebere longe
 finibus, occursu dum non pia templa domosque
 commacules. habeant te lustra tuusque Cithaeron;'
 (St. *Theb.* 11.748–52)

The ruler is moved by [Antigone's] speech, but he does not entirely indulge the suppliant's tears, and he keeps back a part of his gift. 'You will not', he says, 'be forced very far away from your home territory, provided that you do not defile its holy temples and our homes with your presence. Let the wilds of your own Cithaeron accommodate you...

The notion of the blind Oedipus returning to Cithaeron, where he was exposed as an infant, has been borrowed from Sophocles via Seneca's *Phoenissae*.⁴ The particular idea of Creon banishing Oedipus to this mountain is a novel one, however, which Statius seems to have invented. Why? The answer is that he is reminding us of his earlier Sophoclean query regarding whether it matters where Oedipus is exiled and buried. It does turn out to matter very much, and for this reason Sophocles' Creon tries to get Oedipus back to Thebes, but not inside the city, just outside it. Ismene warns her father:

Ισ.] Ὡς σ' ἄγχι γῆς στήσωσι Καδμείας, ὅπως
 κρατῶσι μὲν σοῦ, γῆς δὲ μὴ 'μβαίνης ὄρων.
 (Soph. OC 399–400)

Is.] That they may settle you near the land of Thebes, to have you in their power, but your foot would not cross its border.

Statius' Euripidean Creon has an inkling of what Sophocles' Creon, in a parallel mythological universe, wanted to do with Oedipus.

Moving now to the twelfth book of the *Thebaid*, we find that it is divided clearly into three parts. The first part deals with the aftermath of the war and then gives a mini-epic-catalogue of the women who have set out from Argos with Argia, wife of Polynices, at their head, going to Thebes in order to ask for the burial of their male kin. We will skip this first part of Book 12, which does not engage much with Sophocles, and we will deal with the remaining two parts under the separate headings of "Argia" and "Athens".

4 The *tuus Cithaeron* of Statius' Creon is an echo of the *meus Cithaeron* of Seneca's Oedipus (13), which is in turn an echo of Sophocles' οὐμὸς Κιθαίων οὔτος (OR 1452): Frank 1995, 81. The setting of the beginning of Seneca's drama is not explicitly stated, but seems to be on Cithaeron; see Frank 1995, 13. On these lines of the *Thebaid*, see also Hardie 1997, 152.

Argia

After the first part of Book 12, the narrative comes to a literal and metaphorical crossroad at lines 141–2, when the women of Argos encounter a fleeing Argive soldier who warns them that it will take force, not prayers, to sway Creon, and suggests that they go to Athens instead to seek the help of Theseus:

(quin 160 ...)

aut uos Cecropiam – prope namque et Thesea fama est
Thermodontiaci laetum remeare triumpho –
imploratis opem? bello cogendus et armis
in mores hominemque Creon.

(Stat. *Theb.* 12.163–6)

Or why not implore Athenian help? They say that Theseus is near, returning successfully from a victory near the river Thermodon. It is by war and weapons that Creon must be forced to abide by the customs of the human race.

This moment also brings to mind divergent tragic narratives, since Plutarch tells us that in stark contrast to Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, in Aeschylus' *Eleusinians*, Theseus used persuasion rather than force to induce Creon to allow the burial of the Argive dead.⁵

At this crossroads, Statius' narrative diverges, just as the versions of Aeschylus and Euripides diverged. Argia convinces the other women of Argos that they should change their course and go to Athens to seek Theseus' armed assistance, while she says that she will carry on to Thebes alone, and pretends that her intention is to approach the parents and sisters of Polynices, her dead husband, namely Oedipus and Jocasta, Antigone and Ismene. In fact, she has no such intention. Her soliloquy that follows shows that she doubts the success of the mission to Athens, and feels in any case that it would take too long. Driven on a heroic, single-minded quest by the thought of Polynices' decaying body, her solitary trip to Thebes can only be described as an *aristeia*.⁶ In her single-mindedness, her unwillingness to brook delay, her readiness to deceive her fellow travellers so that she has the freedom to act alone, and her insistence on attending to the corpse of Polynices alone, she calls to mind precisely the qualities of Sophocles' Antigone. As we will see, Argia and Antigone will shortly encounter one another in a scene over which the presence of Sophocles' play hangs heavily.

5 Plu. *Thes.* 29; on the contrast between the accounts of Aeschylus and Euripides, see Gantz 1993, 296. On these lines of the *Thebaid*, see Dominik 1994, 42.

6 More generally, "the wives and mothers each have their *aristeia* of grief": Lovatt 1999, 145.

So Argia's part of *Thebaid* 12 (lines 197–311) begins with the heroine travelling headlong to Thebes; she is alone except for an elderly and essentially useless male companion as chaperon. She climbs mountains, fords rivers, and travels through dangerous forests, pressing on despite cold, darkness, and wild animals in a truly heroic and solitary effort. Then, when she arrives at Thebes, she heads right for the battlefield, slipping on the gore, ignoring the pain as she stumbles over discarded weapons. In recognition of this heroic effort, Juno looks down on her with pity and assists her by lighting her way with moonlight.⁷

Statius had applied the apparatus of epic machinery to the women of Argos when he began Book 12 with a formal catalogue of mourning women setting out on an expedition; Argia's exploits are portrayed as a heroic *aristeia*, driven by mourning; and so it is fitting that we will also be treated to an epic duel between mourning women. Statius has been building up to this confrontation, since the absence of Antigone has been made particularly acute by the attribution of her paradigmatic single-mindedness to Argia. After Argia discovers the body of Polynices, it is she who brings up the question of the strange absence of Sophocles' heroine:

nullasne tuorum
mouisti lacrimas? ubi mater, ubi incluta fama
Antigone?

(Stat. *Theb.* 330–2)

Did you move none of your own family to tears? Where is your
mother, where is the renowned Antigone?

Where, indeed, is Antigone? The literal question of Antigone's whereabouts on the battlefield is echoed in the mind of the audience on the level of literature, and this transference of sense is authorized by Argia's reference to the fame of Antigone. For Argia, Antigone's fame rests on her past as a dutiful daughter and sister; but for the audience, in this context above all, it is an unmistakable reference to the fame of Sophocles' heroine.⁸ The very phrase *incluta fama* is itself a pleonastic etymological figure that links the Latin *incluta* to the Greek κλυτά, and so puts us in mind of Greek language and literature.

As Antigone then makes her belated appearance on the battlefield, she indignantly rebukes this stranger who has upstaged her, taken the place that in literary history is rightfully hers:

'cuius' ait 'manes, aut quae temeraria quaeris

⁷ On Argia's heroism, see Vessey 1973, 131–3 and Lovatt 1999, 137: "Argia is more of a hero than her husband ever was".

⁸ Pollmann 2004, 166. On the presence here of Antigone's "literary heritage", see Hershkowitz 1994, 143 with n. 42.

nocte mea?'

(Stat. *Theb.* 12.366–7)

She cried: 'Whose body do you seek in this
night that is mine? Who are you, daring woman?'

"Who are you and what are you doing here in my role?", Antigone asks, and once again the question functions on the level of literary history as much as on the concrete level of the situation on the battlefield.⁹

Even as Statius fails to follow Sophocles here, he really wants us to notice that fact. This is emphasised again by Antigone when she scolds herself for having allowed another to take the place meant for her:

cedo, tene, pudet heu! pietas ignaua sororis!
haec prior – !

(Stat. *Theb.* 12.384–5)

Take him, he is yours! Ah, shame! Ah, for the sluggish
devotion of a sister! This woman was here first!¹⁰

Once again, Antigone's exclamation also operates on the level of literary history.¹¹ "This woman was here first!" not only refers to Argia's usurpation of Antigone's rightful role, it may also refer to the fact that in archaic Greek poetry before the composition of Sophocles' play, it is always Argia who buries Polynices; Antigone's involvement in the burial of Polynices was probably a Sophoclean invention.¹²

So who *is* writing the script here, if not Sophocles? If Antigone has been upstaged by Argia, what writer has upstaged Sophocles? Let us examine the development of the plot. Argia and Antigone condole and commiserate and then collaborate in finding a pyre for Polynices. When they unwittingly put his body on the still-burning pyre of Eteocles, it explodes and the flames of the two brothers continue fighting even after death. This version of events shares some similarities with the account in Hyginus, which in turn has sometimes been

9 Pollmann 2004, 174.

10 In his Loeb edition, Shackleton Bailey (2003, 277) translates *haec prior* as "This has first place," and explains elsewhere (1983, 60) what exactly this means: "This (wifely) love takes precedence of a sister's", taking *haec* to agree with *pietas*. Pollmann (2004, 178) rightly rejects this awkward translation, and to her arguments one could add that it is most natural to take *prior* as explaining *ignaua* in the previous line: the woman who has come in second reproaches herself for her torpor.

11 See Lovatt 1999, 138: "Yet again Statius plays with belatedness and priority: the intruder in the story has taken over the central role."

12 Gantz 1993, 519–20, assuming that the end of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* is interpolated; see also Hoffman 1999, 8. I owe this point to Ettore Cingano.

assumed to depend on some tragedian, perhaps Euripides, and perhaps his own *Antigone*.¹³ It would be nice and neat if we had here another place where Statius had to make a choice between Sophocles and Euripides for his plot and chose the latter, but there really is no hard evidence to implicate Euripides, despite the attractiveness of the hypothesis that his *Antigone* rewrote Sophocles' drama in this way. One Greek writer who did tell of the duelling flames of the dead brothers is Callimachus, and it is Ovid who tells us this, but we do not have enough information to know the nature or extent of Statius' debt to that poet at this point.¹⁴ The best we can say is that the prominence given to Argia and the story of the divided pyre present us with a decidedly non-Sophoclean picture. Nonetheless, the themes that Statius explores will continue to be intensely Sophoclean.

We have been expecting that Argia's heroic quest will culminate in an epic duel, and right after the brothers' implacable, posthumous hatred, a different sort of hatred is manifested:

ambitur saeua de morte animosaque leti
 spes furit: haec fratris rapuisse, haec coniugis artus
 contendunt uicibusque probant: 'ego corpus', 'ego ignes',
 'me pietas', 'me duxit amor'. deposcere saeua
 supplicia et dextras iuuat insertare catenis.
 nusquam illa alternis modo quae reuerentia uerbis,
iram odiumque putes; tantus discordat utrimque
 clamor, et ad regem qui deprendere trahuntur.
(Stat. *Theb.* 12.456–63)

They are zealous for a cruel death, and a lively hope of extinction rages within them. They contend that they stole, the one her husband's, the other her brother's limbs, and in turns they demonstrate their case: 'I brought the body'; 'I brought the fire'; 'I was led by duty,' 'I by affection'. They delight in asking for brutal punishment and in putting their wrists into the chains. Gone is the mutual respect that was in the words of each; you would think it anger and hatred, so great is the shouting on either side; and they drag the men who have captured them before the king.

The commiseration and exchange of sympathy between them has passed with the moment and the Argive woman and the Theban woman resume their hostility. Despite their cooperation in seeing to the corpse of Polynices, they are

¹³ Hyg. *Fab.* 72. On the serious problems entailed by using Hyginus to reconstruct Euripides' *Antigone*, see Jouan and van Looy 1998, 193–201.

¹⁴ Ov. *Tr.* 5.33–9, and Call. F 105 (Pfeiffer).

still competing for the role of Antigone the martyr.¹⁵ And so once again, this scene can be read on the level of literary history. What better description of the theme of Sophocles' *Antigone* could there be than to say that it shows how *pietas* and *amor* (devotion and love) can harden into *iram odiumque* (anger and hatred)? It is not just in volunteering to be Creon's victim that the two women compete for the role of Antigone, but in their hatred and implacability, too.

If we peek ahead for a moment, we find that after Athens the scene returns again to Thebes with the advent of Theseus, and when it does, the two women are still poised in the same attitude of self-immolation, frozen in defiance, despite the passing of much time:

saeuus at interea ferro post terga reuinctas
Antigonen uiduamque Creon Adrastida leto
admouet; ambae hilares et mortis amore superbae
ensibus intentant iugulos regemque cruentum
destituunt, cum dicta ferens Theseia Phegeus
astitit.

(Stat. *Theb.* 12.677–82)

But meanwhile cruel Creon brings Antigone and the widowed daughter of Adrastus forward to their deaths, their hands bound behind them with chains; both are cheerful and proud in their desire for death; they hold out their necks to the swords and disappoint the blood-thirsty king, when all of a sudden Phegeus stood there, bearing Theseus' message.

As it turns out, they are saved by the bell, and events hasten to bring an end to Creon rather than to them. Or at least Argia is saved, since we hear about her later; Statius leaves the door open to the possibility that Antigone did perish at this moment.¹⁶ It is worth noting here that Phegeus is not an ordinary epic herald: he has no substantive role in the epic; the message he delivers is vaguely described and adds little to the plot, since the arrival of the Athenian force is already evident and Theseus will shortly confront Creon face to face. So why is he here? He is in fact an escapee from another genre. The messenger is a tragic figure *par excellence*, and his appearance here in epic is a signal of crossing genres. In fact, in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, Theseus does send a messenger to Thebes, but calls him back when a messenger happens to arrive from Thebes at that very moment. Dramatic unity of space demanded that Euripides' confrontation between representatives of Thebes and Athens should take place at Eleusis, but Statius operates under no such constraint, and so the messenger

15 Lovatt 1999, 144: "Argia and Antigone are set against each other at the last by rivalry in grief, ... both fighting for the central role in the story".

16 Pollmann 2004, 196; Argia is mentioned again at 12.804.

sent by Euripides' Theseus tumbles through time and space and genres until he finally arrives in Statius' epic. The sudden appearance of a messenger here is an acknowledgement to us that this Theban tableau is paradigmatically tragic. Creon about to put the defiant Antigone to death, the sudden arrival of a messenger with surprising news: all this must make us think of Sophocles' *Antigone*, even as the presence of Argia and the mission of Phegeus signal that Statius is following a Euripidean, or at least non-Sophoclean, tradition.

Athens

After the arrest of Argia and Antigone, the scene switches to Athens, where the rest of the Argive women are just arriving. They make straight for the 'Altar of Mercy' or *Clementia*, which is probably to be identified with the altar of the twelve gods, the central milestone in the Athenian agora.¹⁷ This passage is one of the most frequently studied parts of the poem, but I want to look not at the fascinating account Statius gives of its cult, but rather at his account of its aetiology:

fama est defensos acie post busta paterni
 numinis Herculeos sedem fundasse nepotes.
 fama minor factis: ipsos nam credere dignum
 caelicolas, tellus quibus hospita semper Athenae,
 ceu leges hominemque nouum ritusque sacrorum
 seminaque in uacuas hinc descendunt terras,
 sic sacrasse loco commune animantibus aegris
confugium, unde procul starent iraeque minaeque
 regnaque, et a iustis Fortuna recederet aris.
 iam tunc innumerae norant altaria gentes:
 huc uicti bellis patriaque a sede fugati
 regnorumque inopes scelerumque errore nocentes
 conueniunt pacemque rogant; mox hospita sedes
 uicit et Oedipodae Furias et funus Olynthi
 textit et a misero matrem summouit Oreste.
 huc uulgo monstrante locum manus anxia Larnae
 deueniunt, cedunt miserorum turba priorum.

(Stat. Theb. 12.497–513):

The report is that the descendants of Hercules, supported in battle after the death of their divine father, set up this altar; but this report comes short of the truth: for it is fitting to believe that the heavenly ones themselves, to whom Athens was always

¹⁷ This would give an extremely precise geographical force to Statius' claim that it was located *urbe ... media* (12.481). On the identification of this altar with the altar of the twelve gods, see the careful argument of Stafford 2000, 199–225.

a hospitable land, just as they once gave laws, and a new man, and sacred mysteries, and the seeds that descended here upon the sterile earth, so now they sanctified in this spot a common refuge for wounded beings, from which anger and threats and power would be far removed, so that Fortune would depart from this righteous altar. This altar was known already to countless races: those defeated in war and those exiled from their country, kings who had lost their thrones, and those guilty of grievous crime, all assemble here and seek peace. Soon this hospitable place would conquer the furies of Oedipus, would shelter the ruin of Olynthus, and would protect poor Orestes from his mother. To this place came the worried band of Argos, with the people showing them where the place was, and the crowd of wretched people who were there before them give way.

It is clear that this passage is dense with allusions to Greek tragedy. First of all, this entire episode in which the Argive women come to Athens is taken from Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, but Statius changes the venue from the sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis to this place at the center of Athens. Why? He wants to generalize the principle of granting succor to suppliants embodied in the *Suppliant Women*, and to make it central to Athens both geographically and culturally. He does this by invoking three other examples, one from each of the great tragedians, to demonstrate that the principle goes far beyond the plot of the *Suppliant Women*. First, he mentions the children of Heracles, ostensibly to reject a chronologically inconvenient version of the founding of the altar that would associate it with them and thus with the generation after Theseus. But this also puts us in mind of Euripides' play by that name, which, like its fellow "political" play, the *Suppliant Women*, illustrates the cultural superiority of Athens in the way it deals with suppliant foreigners. The Heraclidae would have been fitting founders of this altar, were it not for the chronological difficulty, which Statius evades by implying that they were simply early pilgrims to the altar, rather than its founders.

Then we come to Oedipus finding rest from his Furies; this is an allusion to the *Oedipus at Colonus* of Sophocles, which, as it turns out, Statius wants to shift not only in time, but also in space, moving its events from Colonus to the Athenian agora. Skipping Olynthus for a moment, we then come to the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, which likewise involves a spatial realignment, since that play is so strongly associated with the Areopagus. All three of these plays, the *Eumenides*, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the *Children of Heracles*, are suppliant dramas in which a downtrodden foreigner comes to Attica to ask Athens for help and protection. So the suppliant women of *Thebaid* 12 play out the plot of not just one particular Euripidean drama, but exemplify something intrinsic to

the spirit of Athens as expressed in dramas by each of its three great playwrights.

So much is clear. What may not be clear at first is that Statius is importing these various tragic models into his epic by way of a third genre: Athenian patriotic oratory. Many of these episodes make up what Roger Brock, in his study of the use of these tropes in the *epitaphios logos* and related speeches, has called “the mythological battle honours of the Athenian state”.¹⁸ The biggest clue to this intersection of Athenian tragedy and patriotic rhetoric is the mention of the fate of Olynthus at the hands of Philip alongside the other mythological parallels. Most editors have obelized this phrase, expecting another myth, but no convincing alternative has presented itself. Shackleton Bailey guardedly accepts the transmitted text in his Loeb edition, pointing out that this is a trope of oratory, and giving some citations from Roman sources.¹⁹ In fact, there is another passage in one of these rhetorical sources, Seneca’s *Controversiae*, which links the destruction of Olynthus with the altar of Mercy at Athens. This is unlikely to be due to coincidence or cross-contamination, so it provides a pretty solid basis for accepting the transmitted text of Statius as genuine, while also demonstrating the heavy use Statius is making here of overtly rhetorical material.²⁰ It is precisely to jolt us into thinking about Athenian patriotic oratory and its appropriation of these tragic myths that Statius includes Olynthus here: it is meant to stand out from the context, as a signal of the declamatory source of this entire passage. In the tradition of the funeral oration, it was commonplace for Athenian orators to recall precisely these mythical episodes when praising their city’s hospitality and benefactions to mankind. For example, Isocrates’ panegyric of Athens links the suppliant children of Heracles with the suppliant Argives, before going on to Athens’ victory over the Amazons (which also features prominently in Statius’ account). Earlier he mentions the gift of Demeter, and the fact that Athens was the first to create laws and a city, connecting the latter with the founding of the Areopagus court. The Demosthenian *epitaphios* moves quickly from the victory over the Amazons to the children of Heracles and the intervention of Theseus against Creon, while the *epitaphios* in the Lysian corpus covers the same examples at

18 Brock 1998, 227.

19 Shackleton Bailey 2003, 286–7. His note reads, “Olynthus, a town in northeastern Greece, was taken by Philip of Macedon in 348 and the inhabitants sold into slavery, but many found refuge in Athens. Their fate became a theme for declaimers (Seneca, *Controversies* 3.8, Ps.-Quintilian, *Shorter Declamations* 292). The anachronistic mention between two figures of mythology is certainly strange and generally considered unbelievable. But no satisfactory substitute has been proposed.”

20 In *Controversiae* 10.5, a sadistic Athenian painter who has abused a refugee from Olynthus to use him as a model for Prometheus in agony is ironically suggested to dedicate his painting at the altar of Mercy; see Stafford 2000, 218f. Anyone who wishes to claim that the text of Statius is corrupt here must now explain how it is that references to the destruction of Olynthus and to the altar of Mercy at Athens, both of which are individually quite rare in surviving Latin literature, happen to be linked together in two quite unrelated texts.

much greater length. In Plato's mock panegyric in the *Menexenus*, the defeat of the Amazons is linked again to the protection offered to the Argives and the children of Heracles. And so on.²¹

An important part of this oratorical tradition was the notion of Athens as a "refuge" for the rest of Greece. The usual term for this was *καταφυγή*, sometimes modified by the adjective *κοινή*, as in this passage from Aeschines:²²

Ἡ δ' ἡμετέρα πόλις, ἡ κοινή καταφυγή τῶν Ἑλλήνων, πρὸς
ἣν ἀφικνοῦντο πρότερον ἐκ τῆς Ἑλλάδος αἱ πρεσβεῖαι, κατὰ
πόλεις ἕκαστοι παρ' ἡμῶν τὴν σωτηρίαν εὖρησόμενοι ...
(Aeschin. 3.134)

And our city, the common refuge of the Greeks, to which in former days used to come the embassies of all Hellas, each city in turn to find safety with us ...

The bilingual Statius has reproduced precisely the meaning, sound, and alliteration of the Greek phrase *κοινή καταφυγή* in his Latin phrase *commune ... confugium* (12.503–4). Note that the emphasis Statius wants to put on this notion of Athens as a refuge puts a bit of a strain on the immediate context, since the Argive women do not in fact want a refuge, they want a champion to go on the offensive.²³

Why does Statius want to repeat these Athenian oratorical tropes, which emphasised that city's tradition of *φιλοξενία* (kindness to strangers), in contrast to the insularity of the Spartans? My argument is that he wants this cosmopolitan vision of Athens to be the model for contemporary Rome. By emphasizing Athens' origins as an asylum, he makes it parallel to Romulus' settlement. Here is Dionysius of Halicarnassus on the origins of Rome:

ἱερὸν ἀνεῖς ἄσυχον ἰκέταις καὶ ναὸν ἐπὶ τούτῳ
κατασκευασάμενος (ὅτῳ δὲ ἄρα θεῶν ἢ δαιμόνων οὐκ ἔχω
τὸ σαφές εἰπεῖν) τοῖς καταφεύγουσιν εἰς τοῦτο τὸ ἱερὸν
ἰκέταις τοῦ τε μηδὲν κακὸν ὑπ' ἐχθρῶν παθεῖν ἐγγυητῆς
ἐγένετο τῆς εἰς τὸ θεῖον εὐσεβείας προφάσει καὶ εἰ βούλοιντο
παρ' αὐτῷ μένειν πολιτείας μετεδίδου καὶ γῆς μοῖραν, ἣν
κτήσαιοτο πολεμίους ἀφελόμενος.

(D. H. 2.15.4)

21 Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 28, 39f, 54–70; see also *Panathenaicus* 168–74. Demosthenes, 60.8. Lysias 2.4–19. Plato, *Menexenus* 239B. For a full bibliography, see Brock 1998.

22 See also Demosthenes, *Letters* 3.11.

23 Euripides had already dramatised Theseus' movement from passive pity to active intervention: see Lloyd 1992, 77–8.

He [Romulus] dedicated a sacred asylum for suppliants, and provided it with a temple (but to which of the gods or divine powers I am not able to say for certain). On the pretence of religious piety, he became the protector of those who fled to this sanctuary as suppliants, lest they suffer any harm from their enemies; and if they decided to stay with him, he shared the citizenship with them and a part of any land that might be taken from the enemy.

Not only is the general character of the Roman asylum and those who seek its shelter reminiscent of Statius' depiction of the Athenian *ara Clementiae*, but even the uncertainty regarding the god to whom it was dedicated finds an echo in Statius' negative depiction of the altar. He stresses that it was *not* dedicated to a powerful god, and that it conspicuously lacked a cult statue (*Theb.* 12.481–2 and 493–4). The only major difference between Romulus' Rome as depicted by Dionysius and Theseus' Athens as depicted by Statius seems to be that the Roman asylum was founded with the goal of increasing the population of the nascent city. And yet, if we look closely, Statius gives us a hint of this sort of activity in Theseus' Athens, too.

In addition to sheltering runaways, another population-building strategy used by Romulus at the foundation of Rome was the rape of the Sabine women. They were carried off by force, but eventually came to settle into their new roles as Roman wives and mothers.²⁴ Now compare Statius' description of Theseus. When we first meet him, he is just returning to Athens from conquering the Amazons at the moment that the Argive women arrive:

ipsae autem nondum trepidae sexumue fatentur,
nec uulgare gemunt, aspernanturque precari,
et tantum innuptae quaerunt delubra Mineruae.
primus amor niueis uictorem cernere uectum
quadriiugis; nec non populos in semet agebat
Hippolyte, iam blanda genas patiensque mariti
foederis. hanc patriae ritus fregisse seueros
Atthides oblique secum mirantur operto
murmure, quod nitidi crines, quod pectora palla
tota latent, magnis quod barbara semet Athenis
misceat atque hosti ueniat paritura marito.

(Stat. *Theb.* 12.529–39)

They [the Amazons] themselves are not yet fearful, nor do they betray their true sex, nor complain boorishly; they refuse to beg and they seek only the shrine of unmarried Minerva. The first

24 See Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Rom. Ant.* 2.30.

desire [of the Athenians] is to see the conqueror, drawn by his four snow-white horses. Hippolyte also attracted attention, friendly now in her expression and enduring the bond of marriage. The women of Athens look askance and mutter quietly to themselves as they are amazed that she has broken the strict laws of her country, that her hair is clean, that her entire chest is hidden beneath her tunic, and that, although a barbarian, she merges herself with mighty Athens, and comes to bear offspring to her enemy husband.

This Roman-style triumphal procession also looks to a Roman mythical model: the rape of the Sabine women. The implication is that not only Hippolyte, but also the other Amazons, will, like the Sabine women, overcome their initial hostility towards their captors and become a part of the Athenian polis; hence the muttering and resentment of the native women.²⁵ Contrary to the usual version of events in Athenian oratory, which depicted the Amazons as a barbarian force to be extirpated, here they arrive as forcibly imported blood-stock, just as Romulus had done. The rape of Hippolyte and the Amazons is a part of the Greek oratorical tradition, but this domestic side of the arrangement is not usually emphasised.²⁶ Plutarch, in fact, in his *syncrisis* of Theseus and Romulus, sets up an opposition between the justified and purposeful rape orchestrated by Romulus, and the many rapes of Theseus, including the Amazons, which were done out of mere hubris and lust (5.2). Statius, in stark contrast, gives us a Theseus who is a close parallel for Romulus. So Statius, with one foot in Greek culture and one in the Roman, envisions Rome as a cosmopolis that has inherited Athens' famous tradition of φιλοξενία as a main source of its strength. This comes out in his *Silvae* as well; for example, in one poem (4.5) Statius, himself quite Greek, welcomes the half-Punic ancestor of the emperor Septimius Severus to Rome and assures him that he is quite the genuine Italian gentleman.²⁷

Before ending on that happy, multi-cultural note, I want to suggest a darker overtone to this connection between Athens and Rome. There is one final Sophoclean moment in the *Thebaid* to consider. In the *Suppliant Women*, Euripides' Theseus explicitly scorns heroic / Aeschylean static battle

25 Pollmann 2004, 217–8 argues that the hostility of the native women and the mention of “offspring” foreshadows the tragic conflict between her son and Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Ahl 1986, 2891–2 emphasizes the hostility between captors and captives in this scene.

26 Mills 1997, 31–2 argues that the experience of the Persian wars made the marriage between Theseus and Antiope / Hippolyte an unwelcome detail to the Athenians, and so it came to be suppressed thereafter. If this is true, it is possible that Statius' domestic picture had an earlier Greek model.

27 See Coleman 1988, 158–73. On Rome as cosmopolis, see Turcan 2006; on Statius and cosmopolitanism, see Woolf 2003, 207–12.

descriptions (846–56), so instead the playwright provides us, via a messenger speech, with a ‘modern’ and realistic account of the tactics and manoeuvres of the forces of Theseus and Creon (650–733). Statius, in defiance of these strictures, gives us a static, traditional epic confrontation between Creon and Theseus of the sort that Euripides’ Theseus had mocked; they trade insults across the battlefield before trading throws of the spear. One obvious model for this is the Homeric epic battle scene, but there is also a tragic model for this particular encounter. In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Creon and Theseus come close to blows on-stage, and exchange pointed remarks.²⁸ In fact, Statius’ Creon enthusiastically asserts an insult that Sophocles’ Creon had diplomatically declined:

KQ.] Ἐγὼ οὐτ’ ἄνδρῶν τήνδε τὴν πόλιν λέγω,
ὦ τέκνον Αἰγέως, οὐτ’ ἄβουλον, ὥς σὺ φής
(Soph. OC 939–40)

Cr.] I am not calling your city unmanly, son of Aegeus, nor heedless either, as you claim.

‘non cum peltiferis’, ait, ‘haec tibi pugna puellis,
virgineas ne crede manus: hic cruda virorum
proelia ...’
(Stat. *Theb.* 12.761–3)

It’s not with girls carrying tiny little shields that you do battle here; do not believe that these are the hands of a maiden; here you will find the bloody warfare of men...

At the climax of a Euripidean narrative, whose plot is largely adapted from the *Suppliant Women*, Statius has inserted a Sophoclean moment of direct confrontation between Creon and Theseus. Why does he allude to the *Oedipus at Colonus* here? Why did he earlier include the asylum granted to Oedipus along with the other, more usual examples of Athenian benefactions to strangers? One answer is that the *Oedipus at Colonus*, written at the end of Sophocles’ life, serves as a powerful ending to the Theban story, and even though Statius rejects its chronology of events, he nevertheless invokes its spirit of closure.

By pushing the asylum and death of Oedipus to the end of the story of the house of Oedipus, just beyond the end of his own narrative, Statius contradicts Sophocles and follows the *Phoenician Women*, in which Euripides said that Oedipus was still alive during the siege of Thebes; but on another

²⁸ The importance of the Theseus of *Oedipus at Colonus* as a model for Statius’ Theseus is noted by Dietrich 1999, 43–4.

level, Statius is being true to the spirit of Sophocles. Even though the plot of the *Oedipus at Colonus* comes in the middle of his three Theban plays, nevertheless the death of Oedipus and the great old age of Sophocles when he wrote it override these prosaic concerns. For Statius, the *Oedipus at Colonus* is rightfully the final work in Sophocles' Theban cycle, despite mythical chronology, and that is why it is yoked by Statius with the *Eumenides* as examples of Athenian succor and tragic closure.²⁹ Paradoxically, the seemingly Euripidean move of keeping Oedipus alive through the siege of Thebes serves ultimately to "correct" the chronological order of the Sophoclean trilogy, emphasizing the spirit of finality in the *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Another way of looking at the presence of Sophocles here is that he provides a Theseus who is different to that of Euripides in a way which is useful to Statius. Euripides' Theseus initially rejects the Argive plea and lectures Adrastus in a hectoring tone, until his mother convinces him that he ought to help and that it is in his self-interest to do so. Euripides' Theseus embodies the strengths and weaknesses of the Athenian democracy. He loves to talk, he rules by consultation and consensus, he changes his mind radically from one moment to the next, and he has a strong sense of self-interest.³⁰ By contrast, Sophocles' Theseus offers refuge to Oedipus immediately and instinctively, even before he is aware that this will bring benefit to Athens. He is no democrat, and he does not feel the need to consult the citizens of Athens on his decision, because he knows that it is right.³¹ This strong, decisive leader is a much better avatar of the Imperial virtue of *Clementia* and thus a better role-model for Domitian.³² Accordingly, Statius' Theseus takes up the cause of the Argive women instantly, and decides to march to Thebes forthwith; there is none of the sophistry and debate of Euripides' *Suppliant Women*.

So there is one more way of thinking about the presence of Sophocles and the *Oedipus at Colonus* here. Just as Euripides' Theseus is a reflection of Athenian democracy, so the *Suppliant Women* as a whole reflects the confidence (or over-confidence) of the city in the years just before the Sicilian expedition. In contrast, the *Oedipus at Colonus* is a product of Sophocles' very old age, and was first produced only after Sophocles' death, and after Athens had been defeated by Sparta. Any work that juxtaposes the *Suppliant Women* and the *Oedipus at Colonus* in the way that Statius does will inevitably call to mind the highs and lows of the Peloponnesian War, which influenced both plays so deeply. Seen in a Roman light, perhaps the Peloponnesian War even becomes an echo of the

29 This link was, of course, already made by Sophocles, who has Oedipus enter a grove of the Eumenides at Colonus: Edmunds 1996, 138–42. On Statius' allusion to the end of the *Oresteia*, see Hardie 1993, 46.

30 See Michelini 1994.

31 On the tension in *Oedipus at Colonus* between Theseus the proto-democrat and Theseus the king, see Blundell 1993, 294–6. On the contrast between Euripides' Theseus and Statius', see Vessey 1973, 308 and Braund 1997, 9.

32 Thus Braund 1997, 9–16.

war of the seven against Thebes. Just as the internal Greek conflict between Argos and Thebes exhausted both sides and enabled Athens easily to conquer the victor, so too the Peloponnesian War enabled outside powers – first Macedon, then Rome – eventually to dominate all of the participants. On this reading, the *Thebaid* proves to have a sudden relevance to Roman politics, as a warning not only against the dangers of civil war, but also of imperial overstretch. Athens is not only a cosmopolitan model for Rome to emulate, but also an imperial fate to beware.

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